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Road-and-rail windfall for N.J.

Congress set to boost state's transit aid 50%, among other favors

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WASHINGTON -- Congress is expected to give final approval today to a \$286.4 billion highway and mass transit bill that includes a 50 percent boost in transit aid for New Jersey and over \$400 million earmarked for specific projects in the state.

The bill also would expand the federal government's commitment to a multibillion-dollar plan for two new commuter rail tunnels between New Jersey and Manhattan.

The measure authorizes \$5.6 billion for highway, road and bridge construction and maintenance and \$2.45 billion in transit aid for New Jersey over the next six years. The spending also is subject to a vote by Congress each year as part of the appropriations process.

"The increase in federal transportation dollars is a welcome change," said Sen. Jon Corzine (D- N.J.), whose office released the New Jersey figures. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) said the increase in funding for transit "will help provide choices New Jerseyans need."

The bill authorizes the U.S. secretary of transportation to fund construction of the rail tunnels under the Hudson River and encourages the Federal Transit Administration to develop a grant agreement for the project. It also authorizes funds to reimburse New Jersey for the \$2.5 million it already has spent on preliminary studies of the project.

"The construction of this tunnel will serve commuters, expand rail service, reduce roadway congestion and grow our economy," Corzine said.

On Wednesday NJ Transit approved a plan to run the tunnels to a train station that would be built at least 70 feet below West 34th Street in Manhattan.

The language authorizing federal spending on the tunnel project became a sticking point for the entire bill Wednesday when questions were raised by Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.), the ranking minority member on the House Public Works and Infrastructure Committee.

According to aides, Corzine organized a series of calls to Oberstar from senior House and Senate Democrats Wednesday night. Later that night, Corzine left a fund-raiser and found Oberstar in the House dining room. Over dessert, the two agreed on the language.

Corzine, Lautenberg and other members of the state's congressional delegation had long sought federal help in building a new trans-Hudson tunnel. The federal government already has spent \$4.7 million on environmental studies; an additional \$3.3 million for continued studies is in a spending bill for the 2006 fiscal year.

The long-delayed blueprint for federal transportation spending through 2009 was reported out yesterday by a House-Senate conference committee that reconciled the bills passed by the two houses. It is the largest federal public works bill in a decade.

The measure replaces a \$218 billion transportation bill for 1998 through 2003. Unable until this week to agree on a new bill, Congress was forced to approve 11 extensions of the previous bill to keep programs running.

New Jersey, traditionally a donor state that contributes more money in federal gasoline taxes than it receives in federal transportation funding, also would benefit under a provision that increases the minimum return on states' tax dollars, to 92 cents from 90.5 cents.

The bill contains thousands of special projects at a cost of roughly \$10 billion nationwide. New Jersey's share includes \$104 million to improve transportation infrastructure used to move freight out of Port Newark and Port Elizabeth, Rep. Robert Menendez (D-13th Dist.) said.

Other projects on a list provided by Corzine's office include \$80 million to upgrade the Amtrak-owned Northeast Corridor rail lines in New Jersey; \$29 million to improve the intersection of interstate Routes 295 and 76 and Route 42 in Camden County; \$14 million for the Route 46 corridor in Bergen and Passaic counties, and \$13 million for a new Route 280 interchange in Harrison.

The bill also includes a provision authored by Corzine and modeled on the New Jersey law that allows police to impound the vehicles of drunk drivers for 12 hours to give them time to sober up.

However, House-Senate conferees dropped from the bill a provision of the Senate package that would have forced states to crack down further on drunk drivers. That measure -- co-sponsored by Lautenberg and Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) -- would have required states to toughen laws for repeat offenders and other high-risk drivers or be forced to shift some of their federal highway construction money into safety programs.

House and Senate conferees stripped from the bill a "pay-to-play" amendment -- co-sponsored in the House by Reps. William Pascrell (D-8th Dist.), Frank LoBiondo (R-2nd Dist.) and Menendez -- that would have allowed states like New Jersey to ban companies from participating in federal contracts if those companies donated to political candidates or parties.

The Federal Highway Administration said this year that New Jersey's new pay-to-play legislation could not apply to federally funded contracts because it would tread upon the constitutional rights of campaign contributors. The New Jersey law prohibits the state from entering into contracts worth more than \$17,500 with those who have donated money to state or county candidates or political parties within the previous 18

months.

A federal judge in Trenton agreed this month that the state law could not apply to federally funded highway projects.

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